

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The politics of tourism statistics

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Abstract

Tourism statistics are important for policymakers to make prudent decisions and for researchers to conduct rigorous research. However, statistics are inherently political. This article highlights three areas where tourism statistics appear misleading, serving industry and government interests. First, United Nations World Tourism Organization's interpretation of national sovereignty such that domestic tourism arrivals are counted as international tourism arrivals. Second, United Nations World Tourism Organization's use of terminology with respect to international tourists and international trips, using both terms interchangeably. Third, anomalies in tourism statistics reported by various governments and international organizations. More critical analysis needs to be undertaken when reporting data. Researchers should use official statistics with caution.

KEYWORDS

politics, statistics, tourist arrivals, UNWTO

1 | INTRODUCTION

The expression "Lies, damned lies, and statistics," popularized by the author, Mark Twain, sums up the belief that the persuasive power of statistics can support a weak (and often exaggerated) argument. Despite its appearances, the presentation of statistics is not value-free (Huff, 1954). The presentation of the type of statistics and the format of those same statistics to support an argument is political (McKercher & Prideaux, 2014). In an age of competition for limited resources, different industries and government organizations need a healthy dose of boosterism to show their sector in a favorable light and demonstrate its benefits to the wider community and economy. For example, Hiller (2000) notes that mega-events including short-term high-profile events such as the Olympics and World Expos often stimulate urban redevelopment but are also instruments of boosterist ideologies promoting economic growth. Concerns related to availability and accuracy of tourism statistics are not new. Edwards (1991) questions reliability of tourism statistics as data from different sources may not match. Lickorish (1997) suggests that the progress in tourism statistics is slow and requires more collaboration. Volo and Giambalvo (2008) provide a case study that demonstrates discrepancies between official statistics and on the ground reality. Frechtling (2010) reviews Tourism Satellite Accounts and recommends further research to clarify several indicators.

This research article contributes to the ongoing discussion on tourism statistics. More specifically, it looks at three different areas

where international tourism statistics seemingly serve as means to highlight the benefits of the tourism industry or to support a political position. McKercher and Prideaux (2014) categorize this as one of the self-interest myths of tourism. The three areas are (a) the delineation of political boundaries so that domestic tourists can be treated as international tourists; (b) the misrepresentation of trips for tourists (i.e., where international trips are noted as international tourists); and (c) anomalies in statistics due to changing politics and international relations. The paper aims to caution researchers and practitioners from taking tourism statistics as an absolute truth but rather approach existing numbers critically and with skepticism. The paper provides various examples each of which probably does not merit a separate paper but which nevertheless deserve acknowledgement in academic literature.

2 | INTERNATIONAL TOURISM VERSUS DOMESTIC TOURISM

Some official international tourist arrival statistics should really be counted as domestic tourism, rather than international tourism. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has consistently chosen more fluid political boundaries in contradiction to the main international body, the United Nations, resulting in higher numbers of overall tourist arrivals. For example, the United Nations considers the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China

to be a single state; therefore, Taiwan is not a member of the United Nations, but Taiwan's tourism statistics are separately included in UNWTO (2017e) statistics. Arrivals to Palestine are separated from Israel's arrivals, but Palestine's quest to be a member of the United Nations failed in 2011/2012 as the United States would have likely vetoed its membership, as the United States is a member of the Security Council. Hence, Palestine has nonmember observer status in the United Nations, despite being recognized by 136 U.N. Member States (UN News Centre, 2012). It is understandable that the UNWTO (2017c) highlights tourist arrivals given its stated purpose, as noted on its website:

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) is the United Nations agency responsible for the promotion of responsible, sustainable and universally accessible tourism. As the leading international organization in the field of tourism, UNWTO promotes tourism as a driver of economic growth, inclusive development and environmental sustainability and offers leadership and support to the sector in advancing knowledge and tourism policies worldwide.

In reviewing UNWTO's mission, Ferguson (2007) notes the competing and sometimes conflicting roles of the UNWTO to (a) act as a campaigning organization for the tourism industry; (b) be a donor for tourism development projects; and (c) be a primary source of research and statistics on global tourism.

A significant number of destinations counted in the UNWTO (2017e) international tourist arrivals are officially noted as territories, dependencies, free associations, or special administrative regions. Most of these geographic regions have some sort of autonomy and self-governance but cannot be considered as independent states. Given that "international" tourists visiting these territories from the de facto metropole should be classified as domestic tourists, the following analysis recalculates the UNWTO-published international tourist arrivals removing those tourist arrivals where tourists from the sovereign state arrive into the territories, dependencies, free associations, and special administrative regions and vice versa. Considering that even independent former colonies remain major destinations for residents of the former metropole (McKercher & Decosta, 2007), counting visitor arrivals from the metropole to dependent territories is not only inaccurate but also misleading in terms of the extent to which the dependent territory is appealing to tourists. The main data source for the international tourist arrivals is the UNWTO's (2006, 2010, 2017e) Yearbook files by destination for the period 1995 to 2014. Some of these destinations' international arrival statistics are more complete than others. For some, several years are missing altogether. For example, although there are total international tourist arrivals for China for the year 1995 to 2005, the breakdown by destination of origin is unavailable. Table 1 shows the list of peripheries and the metropole for which there are data on international tourist arrivals.

2.1 | (Greater) China!

Three territories that UNWTO counts separately from the People's Republic of China but are internationally recognized as part of

China are Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. In 1997, Hong Kong reverted to the People's Republic of China after having been a colony of the United Kingdom since 1842. Hong Kong is designed as a Special Administrative Region (GovHK, 2017). Similarly, Macau was transferred from Portugal to the People's Republic of China on December 20, 1999. As with Hong Kong, Macau is also designed as a Special Administrative Region (Macao SARG Portal, 2017). Both of these regions come under a "One Country, Two Systems" principle. Hong Kong exhibits some different governance procedures than Mainland China, for example, the ability to hold protests, as evidenced by the 2014 protests; the so called "Umbrella Movement." There is also a border control implemented between Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and Mainland China. But although there is more autonomy in Hong Kong, and there may be some local sentiment for secession from the People's Republic of China, the fact remains that China has sovereignty over Hong Kong (News.gov.hk, 2017). There is an argument then that Mainland Chinese visiting Hong Kong should be classified as domestic tourists and not counted as part of UNWTO international tourist arrival statistics.

In terms of tourism, the Individual Visit Scheme, which started July 28, 2003, allows Mainland China tourists to visit Hong Kong and Macau on an individual basis (Hong Kong Tourism Commission, 2017). Prior to this, Mainland Chinese residents could only visit Hong Kong and Macau as a business tourist or as part of a tour group. For Taiwan (Republic of China), the main organization of the United Nations itself does not recognize Taiwan as an independent state but categorizes Taiwan as a Province of People's Republic of China. On October 25, 1971, Taiwan (Republic of China) was replaced by the People's Republic of China in the United Nations (1971). Similar to Hong Kong and Macau, visitors from Mainland China require a permit to visit Taiwan.

China is trumpeted as the largest outbound market. However, in 2014, 54.1% of this outbound market visited Hong Kong and Macao, its Special Administrative Regions, and another 8.5% visited Taiwan. If these overnight trips were counted as domestic tourism visits, China's outbound tourism would be 62.6% lower than reported by the UNWTO.

2.2 | France and its "colonies"

France has many overseas territories (*France d'outre-mer*; Ministère des Outre-mer, 2017); some might consider them colonies; that the UNWTO treats as independent states and hence includes tourists from the colonial master, France, in their international tourist arrival statistics. Arguably, this inflates the number of international tourist arrivals. France denotes this category of territories as "Overseas France." They consist of all the French-administered territories outside of Europe. Each territory has different legal status and level of autonomy; however, for all intents and purposes, they are colonies, having voting rights in the French Parliament (and in the European Parliament). Further, residents of Overseas France have French nationality. This is additional evidence that these international tourists should be classified as domestic tourists.

TABLE 1 Sovereign states and their dependencies

Metropole	Territory/dependency	Status	UNWTO region
Australia	Norfolk Island	Territory of Australia	Asia Pacific
People's Republic of China	Hong Kong	Special administrative regions of China (SAR)	Asia Pacific
People's Republic of China	Macau	Special administrative regions of China (SAR)	Asia Pacific
People's Republic of China	Taiwan	Province of China	Asia Pacific
France	French Guiana	Overseas department of France	Americas
France	French Polynesia	Overseas lands of France	Asia Pacific
France	Guadeloupe	Overseas department of France	Americas
France	Martinique	Overseas department of France	Americas
France	New Caledonia	Overseas territory of France	Asia Pacific
France	Reunion	Overseas department of France	Africa
Netherlands	Aruba	A constituent country of the Kingdom of the Netherlands	Americas
Netherlands	Curaçao	A constituent country of the Kingdom of the Netherlands	Americas
Netherlands	Sint Maarten	A constituent country of the Kingdom of the Netherlands	Americas
New Zealand	Cook Islands	Self-governing in free association with New Zealand	Asia Pacific
New Zealand	Niue	Self-governing in free association with New Zealand	Asia Pacific
New Zealand	Tokelau	Self-administering territory of New Zealand	Asia Pacific
United Kingdom	Anguilla	Overseas territory of the United Kingdom	Americas
United Kingdom	Bermuda	Overseas territory of the United Kingdom	Americas
United Kingdom	British Virgin Islands	Internal self-governing overseas territory of the United Kingdom	Americas
United Kingdom	Cayman Islands	Overseas territory of the United Kingdom	Americas
United Kingdom	Montserrat	Overseas territory of the United Kingdom	Americas
United Kingdom	Turks and Caicos Islands	Overseas territory of the United Kingdom	Americas
United States	American Samoa	Unincorporated and unorganized territory of the United States	Asia Pacific
United States	Guam	Organized and unincorporated territory of the United States	Asia Pacific
United States	Northern Mariana Islands	Commonwealth in political union with the United States	Asia Pacific
United States	Puerto Rico	Commonwealth associated with the United States	Americas
United States	U.S. Virgin Islands	Organized and unincorporated territory of the United States	Americas

Note. UNWTO = United Nations World Tourism Organization.

2.3 | Elsewhere

As shown in Table 1, the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, Netherlands, and New Zealand also have territories/dependencies where arrivals from the metropole are counted as international arrivals into these territories (UNWTO, 2017e). In the case of the United Kingdom, the British Overseas Territories are under the jurisdiction and sovereignty of the United Kingdom (GOV.UK., 2017). They have not been granted independence or have voted to remain British territories. Similarly, in the case of the kingdom of the Netherlands, Aruba, Curaçao, and Sint Maarten are constituent countries, where in practice, most of their affairs are administered by the Netherlands (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015). They do have some degree of autonomy with their own parliaments.

Table 2 shows the original international arrivals and the amount of international arrivals excluding those international arrivals from dependent territories for the years 2010 to 2014 broken down by UNWTO region. Europe and the Middle East region do not have any adjustments, as there are no dependencies in the Middle East. There should be adjustments to Europe in the figures in Table 2 as the arrivals to France, United States, United Kingdom, and Netherlands in the database have not listed arrivals by their territories/dependencies. The main adjustments to the overall arrivals occur in the Asia Pacific region and the Americas. For example, in 2014, unadjusted international

tourist arrivals to Asia Pacific were 264.4 million. Excluding bilateral tourism flows from French arrivals to New Caledonia and French Polynesia, New Zealand to Niue and the Cook Islands, Australian tourists to Norfolk Island, and U.S. tourists to American Samoa, Guam, and the Northern Marianas and bilateral tourism flow between People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Republic of China reduced tourism arrivals to 193.34 million.

For the Americas, U.S. arrivals to Puerto Rico comprise the largest area for adjustment. Over 2 million U.S. tourists travel to Puerto Rico each year. Commonwealth of Puerto Rico is an unincorporated territory controlled by the U.S. government (Oficina de Servicios Legislativos, 2017).

Table 3 shows the differences in the international tourist arrivals of what is published and the international tourist arrivals when adjustments are made by removing the arrivals and entries from territories and dependencies. Total global international arrivals are approximately 6.5% lower after making the adjustment. This adjustment globally equates to about 70 million international trips. The decrease is so large that it would be 2013, not 2012, that was heralded as the first year of 1 billion international tourists. The main difference occurs in the Asia Pacific region and specifically by counting intra-Greater China arrivals as international tourists, rather than as domestic tourists. The differences in the arrivals numbers are lower year by year by 28.0% to 26.9% over the 2010 to 2014 period.

TABLE 2 International tourist arrivals with adjustments

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
World	950,800,000	1,014,600,000	1,066,500,000	1,101,400,000	1,137,100,000
Revised world	888,645,817	948,479,666	997,927,191	1,029,420,759	1,062,292,211
Europe	489,400,000	541,100,000	567,100,000	580,200,000	580,200,000
Asia and Pacific	205,500,000	218,300,000	233,800,000	249,900,000	264,400,000
French territories	79,389	88,992	91,129	87,012	85,459
N.Z. territories	83,179	92,236	98,310	96,550	98,217
Australia territories	2,370	2,710	1,700	1,840	2,780
U.S. territories	114,465	110,293	107,957	101,233	108,551
China/Hong Kong/Macau	49,192,197	53,212,016	54,365,049	56,872,878	59,221,251
Taiwan	8,019,650	8,408,791	9,719,206	10,054,267	11,545,736
Revised Asia and Pacific	148,008,750	156,384,962	169,416,649	182,686,220	193,338,006
Americas	150,100,000	155,600,000	162,600,000	167,600,000	181,900,000
French territories	949,073	596,973	599,937	955,336	594,134
U.K. territories	50,189	50,569	56,902	61,806	45,305
U.S. territories	3,355,628	3,228,823	3,203,052	3,441,417	2,783,499
N.L. territories	234,043	239,231	238,967	228,102	232,657
Revised Americas	145,511,067	151,484,404	158,501,142	162,913,339	178,244,405
Africa	50,400,000	50,100,000	52,400,000	54,600,000	55,200,000
Reunion	74,000	89,700	90,600	78,800	90,200
Revised Africa	50,326,000	50,010,300	52,309,400	54,521,200	55,109,800
Middle East	55,400,000	49,500,000	50,600,000	49,100,000	55,400,000

TABLE 3 Absolute and percentage change in tourist arrivals

Decrease in tourism arrivals	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
World	62,154,183	66,120,334	68,572,809	71,979,241	74,807,789
Asia Pacific	57,491,250	61,915,038	64,383,351	67,213,780	71,061,994
Americas	4,588,933	4,115,596	4,098,858	4,686,661	3,655,595
Africa	74,000	89,700	90,600	78,800	90,200
Percentage change					
World (%)	-6.5	-6.5	-6.4	-6.5	-6.6
Asia Pacific (%)	-28.0	-28.4	-27.5	-26.9	-26.9
Americas (%)	-3.1	-2.6	-2.5	-2.8	-2.0
Africa (%)	-0.1	-0.2	-0.2	-0.1	-0.2

UNWTO's decision to incorporate dependent territories as independent states boosts international tourism arrival statistics. On the one hand, policymakers and the destination marketing organizations of these dependent territories desire to know how many tourists are arriving and from where these tourists originate. But on the other hand, this would be the situation for any subregion. For example, the Hawaii Tourism Authority wants to know where their tourists originate from, whether from the U.S. Mainland or elsewhere but that does not mean that they should be included in international tourist arrival counts, just because Hawaii is a discontinuous State.

3 | TRIPS VERSUS TOURISTS

December 13, 2012, is the symbolic day that the UNWTO heralded the arrival of the 1 billionth tourist for that calendar year; the first time more than 1 billion "tourists" had made an international trip in 1 year

(UNWTO, 2017b). UNWTO promoted the event as an opportunity to grow economies, create jobs, and contribute to international development. Moreover, these 1 billion tourists can "buy local" and contribute to the host communities, preserve heritage, learn about local culture, and save energy. The UNWTO (2017b) webpage states "1 billion tourists, 1 billion faces." Subsequent press releases by the UNWTO highlight the remarkable achievements that tourism could perform, such as: "A transformative force, tourism brings livelihood opportunities and helps alleviate poverty, making a genuine difference in the lives of millions of people." At the time, the world's population was approximately 7.08 billion (Geohive, 2017). One could almost be led to think that about 14.1% of the world's population took an international trip in the year 2012. Indeed, UNWTO statistics of 1.035 billion tourists in 2012 and forecasts for 1.6 billion tourists by 2020 and 1.8 billion tourists by 2030 have been further transmitted by researchers in peer-reviewed journals (e.g., see Barrowclough, 2007; Wong & Brooks, 2015; Wu & Li, 2014). However, the concepts

of gross travel propensity and net travel propensity highlight the difference between tourists and trips. The gross travel propensity is the total number of trips as a percentage of the population (Page & Connell, 2009, p. 51). The unit of analysis is the number of trips. The net travel propensity refers to the percentage of the population that takes at least one trip in a given period of time. The unit of analysis is the tourist. Not surprisingly, net travel propensity varies from country to country, due to factors such as the level of income and geographic location.

McKercher (2009) notes that net travel propensities are difficult to find. Cooper, Fletcher, Fyall, Gilbert, and Wanhill (2008) report that the net travel propensity for New Zealand is 50%. This is much higher than for Australia and the United States, at 24% and 22%, respectively. But New Zealand's travel propensity is still much lower than those countries with high border crossings such as Canada and Germany, whose travel propensities are 68% and 85%, respectively. In the context of Hong Kong, McKercher (2009) explores the issue of nontraveling residents and the obstacles to international travel. McKercher notes that for Hong Kong, net travel propensity varied between less than 62% and 73.1% over the period 2000 to 2007, depending on the economic environment. Hong Kong has an estimated population of 7.3 million residents in 2015 and made more than 89 million outbound trips in that year (UNWTO, 2017a). It could reasonably be assumed that net travel propensities for developing countries are lower than for developed countries.

By reporting trips as tourists, UNWTO portrays international tourism as more inclusive than it really is, with a wider range of individuals taking trips. In reality, a smaller subsection of individuals may be taking an increasing number of trips. For example, the UNWTO (2006) reported that in 2004, the gross travel propensity for the Czech Republic was 3.6, that is, 360 trips per year for every 100 persons, whereas for Nicaragua, the gross travel propensity was 0.02 departures per 100 persons.

It is not clear why the UNWTO celebrates the number of trips as the number of tourists. Perhaps, it is because it is an easier concept to understand. Perhaps, it is because UNWTO wants tourism to be seen as more wide ranging and inclusive. The difference between the number of trips and the number of tourists may not be important for many planning and development decisions, for example, for such infrastructure development projects as airports. Thus, it may be perceived as an unnecessary burden to estimate the exact number of people taking international trips. However, if international tourism is seen as a social phenomenon that impacts positively on individuals and societies, it is important to know how many people participate in international travel and who they are. Indeed, the vast majority of the world's population is still excluded from international travel. Lack of disposable income and visa restrictions still make international tourism prohibitive for many people across the world, we just do not know for how many.

4 | DYNAMICS OF POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The ability to track historical data and forecast the future of the tourism sector through time series is important for decision-making. However, the world is dynamic. Changes in politics, international

relations, country borders, as well as unreliable data make year-to-year comparisons challenging. One region where such issues are clearly visible is the former Soviet Union. For example, Kazakhstan does not provide any visitor statistics before year 1998 (Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2017). UNWTO (2017e) reported all visitors to Georgia from the Commonwealth of Independent States (a regional organization of nine former Soviet Union republics) together until year 2000.

4.1 | Belarus

UNWTO (2017e) visitor arrivals data for Belarus contain a "USSR (former)" row until 1998. However, which countries were included in that section is not clear as separate numbers are provided at the same time for nine out of 16 former Soviet republics. Moreover, the absence of border controls between Russia and Belarus since 1998 creates another false impression concerning visitor arrivals to Belarus. There were 355,342 international trips to Belarus in 1998, according to UNWTO (2017d). In 1999, this number dropped to 75,440. The drop is primarily due to the reduction in numbers from Russia (193,514 fewer trips between 1998 and 1999). However, the change in tourist arrival statistics does not mean necessarily that fewer Russians visited Belarus in 1999. The difference is probably due to the change in the border regulations so that most visitors from Russia are no longer counted (Union State Information Analysis Portal, 2017). This is going to change again as Belarus is implementing a Tourist Satellite Account system to monitor its tourism, thus changing the methodology for data collection and analysis. One such change will be monitoring of visitors from Russia (Belta, 2017). Interestingly, the arrivals from Belarus to Russia have not seen rapid changes since 1996. Why the new policies implemented in 1998 did not affect Russian visitor statistics the way they did for Belarusian statistics is not clear. Russia changed its tourism statistics methodology in 2014, mostly to redefine key terms, such as the definition of a tourist (Federal Service of State Statistics, 2014).

4.2 | Georgia

International relations between Russia and its neighbors from the former Soviet Union have been rather turbulent. One example is the conflict between Russia and Georgia in August 2008 (Allison, 2008). As a result, Russia recognized independence of two parts of Georgia, namely, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Abkhazia was the most popular destination for visitors from Russia in 2016: 4,256,754 trips, 11% growth compared to 2015. The number of trips to South Ossetia is lower at 435,478 in 2016 (Federal Agency for Tourism, 2017). Many residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have obtained Russian citizenship and passports since 2002 (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Thus, in many cases, the statistics of Russians visiting Abkhazia and South Ossetia are actually registering the return of residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia back from a trip to Russia. UNWTO does not recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent; thus, trips between Russia and the two breakaway republics do not appear in UNWTO statistics.

Further, the overall outbound numbers from Russia appearing in the UNWTO (2017a) Compendium of Tourism Statistics are higher

than the ones presented by the Russian Federal Agency for Tourism (2016b). According to UNWTO (2017a), there were 45.9 million departures from Russia in 2014 and 34.5 million in 2015. The respective numbers from the Russian Federal Agency for Tourism (2016b) are 42.9 million in 2014 and 34.4 million in 2015. Considering that the UNWTO numbers should originate from the Russian authorities, the 3 million departures difference in 2014 is rather surprising. The reason for the discrepancy remains unclear.

4.3 | Ukraine

The conflict in East Ukraine and the annexation/return of Crimea by/to Russia (Mankoff, 2014) present another more recent case highlighting the impact of changes in political map on tourism statistics. Until 2014, Crimea was part of Ukraine. In spring 2014, a referendum took place in Crimea as a result of which the Republic joined the Russian Federation. The international community does not recognize the results of this referendum and considers Crimea a part of Ukraine. Crimea is however administered as part of Russia since that referendum (BBC, 2016). In 2013, there were 5.9 million visitors to Crimea, 65.6% of them were from Ukraine and 26.1% were from Russia. In 2014, there were 3.8 million arrivals to Crimea, 65.8% of them were from Russia. There were 4.6 million visitor arrivals to Crimea in 2015 and 5.6 million visitor arrivals in 2016.

The official statistics from Ministry of Resorts and Tourism of Crimea (2017) does not provide numbers of non-Russian tourists visiting Crimea. According to Russian Federal Agency for Tourism (2016a), 101,000 foreign residents have been accommodated in commercial accommodation in Crimea in 2015. It is illegal under the international law to enter Crimea without passing a border control point controlled by Ukrainian authorities. A special permit to enter Crimea via a Ukrainian control point must be obtained by anyone wanting to visit Crimea (Embassy of Ukraine to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 2015). Thus, the number of non-Russian visitors is low. Although over 5 million arrivals have been made by Russians to a territory that is considered by most nations and international organizations as part of Ukraine, these numbers are not reflected in UNWTO statistics. Visitor arrivals to Ukraine dropped from 24.7 million in 2013 to 12.7 million in 2014 (Visit Kiev Ukraine, 2017). The largest drop was among visitors from Russia: Only 2.3 million arrivals from Russia were recorded in 2014 in comparison to 10.3 million in 2013 (UNWTO, 2017e). Considering that 1.5 million of those Russians who visited Ukraine in 2013, visited Crimea, the statistics for Ukraine would look differently if Russians arriving to Crimea were counted as arrivals to Ukraine in 2014 and onwards.

Another Russian-Ukrainian border that is not controlled by Ukrainian authorities is the border between Russia and the two separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. The number of border crossings between Russia and the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics is not known. The separatist forces of Donetsk and Luhansk continue to be in armed conflict with Ukrainian authorities since 2014 (UK Government, 2017). It is widely accepted by Ukrainian, Russian, and international organizations that there are Russian volunteers supporting the Donetsk and Luhansk separatists in the region (Lazaredes, 2015; Russia Today, 2014). Should they be counted as

voluntourists arriving in Ukraine? Although these numbers may appear small in comparison to the millions of arrivals to Crimea or Abkhazia, this instance too demonstrates a conundrum surrounding tourism statistics.

Changes in borders, border controls, and international politics are not limited to the aforementioned examples. Indeed, there were 11 changes in national borders since year 2000 including the establishment of four new independent states of Timor-Leste, Montenegro, Kosovo, and South Sudan. There are also other ongoing and frozen conflicts for control over different territories, such as Western Sahara (partially controlled by Morocco), Transnistria (breakaway territory of Moldova), Northern Cyprus (claimed by Greece and Turkey), Nagorno-Karabakh (claimed by Armenia and Azerbaijan), Kashmir and Jammu (partially controlled by India, Pakistan, and China), Korea (the whole Korean peninsula is claimed by both DPRK and Republic of Korea), and Arab-Israeli conflict (control over Palestinian territories; Council for Foreign Relations, 2017).

Besides the issues of political changes, the year-to-year data of some countries may raise suspicion. For example, there were 57,517 arrivals to Timor-Leste in 2012, 77,868 in 2013, and 59,811 in 2014. It would appear that Timor-Leste was an especially popular destination in 2013 (UNWTO, 2017e). Where did these extra 20,000 arrivals come from? Unfortunately, it is impossible to establish as there were 24,118 arrivals to Timor-Leste from "Other countries of the World" in 2013. In comparison, there were only 3,758 arrivals from other countries in 2012 and 7,827 in 2014. Another example of suspicious year-to-year statistics is in Ethiopia. Ethiopia has recorded the exact same 12% growth in arrivals from each country of the world in 2015 as compared to 2014 (UNWTO, 2017e). The unreliability of data is further discussed in Masiero (2016). Masiero (2016) reviews international visitor surveys for Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom, and United States. The comparison among these five countries demonstrates the differences in question wording, sample population, sample method, sample sizes, sampling error, and reporting. This demonstrates, even for well-resourced statistics agencies, the complexities of the issue.

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The designations employed and the presentation of material in this publication do not imply the expression of any opinions whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. (UNWTO, 2016, p. 15)

Although it would be ideal not to have a politicized representation of tourism statistics, it is unfortunately impossible. Tourism statistics refer to crossing of boundaries of States. Thus, the organization presenting the statistics takes a stand on recognition of certain territories as independent States or as territories belonging to a certain State. Tourism statistics are similar to political maps in that the designer of the map makes a decision where to draw borders and which color to paint the land (Crampton, 2002). Although UNWTO

has been used to illustrate the issue of politics in tourism statistics, this is not to suggest that UNWTO is wrong. Moreover, although the present paper suggested that certain tourism statistics reflect political decisions (by international organizations and/or national tourism authorities), authors do not suggest that all tourism statistics issues are grounded in politics, many are indeed technical. However, it is important to use the numbers presented by various organizations with caution as they may not reflect the complexity of reality and may lead to wrong conclusions by policymakers, private sectors, and academics.

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Tourist statistics are useful for quantifying the size and impact of tourism to policymakers and researchers alike. These statistics provide the empirical evidence for theories to be tested and hypotheses accepted or rejected. "Tourism" as an activity competes for the budget and attention of consumers, businesses, and governments. As such, those with a vested interest in the industry want to portray tourism as a panacea to many of the world's problems. Consider International Institute for Peace Through Tourism (2017), which suggests that tourism is a "peace" industry, and each traveler is a potential "ambassador for peace." Such statements are overly optimistic with little evidence to support them (Pratt & Liu, 2016). In turn, whether deliberate or accidental, it can be argued that tourism statistics often overstate and exaggerate the size and impact of tourism.

This research paper demonstrates the politicization of tourism and the use of its statistics to boost the industry. Three issues have been covered regarding the use of statistics. The first issue relates to how, arguably, a significant number of international tourist arrivals could, in fact, be counted as domestic tourism and hence should not be counted in the UNWTO's international tourist arrival statistics. Globally, this overestimates worldwide international tourist arrivals by between 6% and 7% (almost 75 million arrivals) including 26% to 28% of arrivals to the Asia Pacific region. Despite the disclaimer at the end of their reports, UNWTO highlights the most favorable statistics to demonstrate the size and reach of the tourism industry.

This boosterism is demonstrated in the second issue where UNWTO use the term "tourists" interchangeably with the term "trips." The celebration of 1 billion tourists in 2012 really was an estimate of 1 billion trips. One billion different people did not take an overseas trip that year. However, a smaller subsection took many trips but many world citizens did not have the means to participate in international tourism. The basic difference between gross travel propensity and net travel propensity was ignored.

Lastly, the counting of international tourism statistics by its very nature is complicated by the changing of borders and political dynamics. Cases of Belarus, Georgia, and Ukraine were presented as examples of politics of tourism statistics. This is an addition to methodological issues (see Masiero, 2016). Tourism statistics need to be interpreted critically. If the data seems too good to be true or if the numbers seem "odd" as in the case of Timor-Leste in 2013 and Ethiopia in 2015 (UNWTO, 2017e), then they probably are.

The presentation and reporting of all statistics, including tourism statistics, is not value free (Huff, 1954). The collection and reporting

of statistics is a political issue both in terms of "Politics" (international relations) and "politics" as in statistics can be used as a device to achieve objectives (show tourism is large, important, ...). As demonstrated throughout the paper, statistics represent the views of organizations and individuals reporting them.

Given that UNWTO is dependent on host countries to send them accurate data and data that have been collected and compiled accurately, what is way forward? Certainly, for policymakers and researchers using the data, while potentially not precise, using these data is better than reporting no data at all. More attention needs to be paid to reporting how accurate the statistics are. Further, UNWTO should be encouraged to highlight not just the numbers but also report a degree of trustworthiness of the data. Rather than resigning to collating data from national organizations, UNWTO could be more proactive in identifying statistical irregularities and assisting national authorities in resolving them. Although, this of course requires additional resources. In the near future, big data should allow for progress in collecting a wide range of information that can be used for official statistics (Hackl, 2016; Heerschap, Ortega, Priem, & Offermans, 2014). In terms of tourism, this may result in additional data on travel flows, travel propensity, and travel patterns.

In the ever-present mantra that "more tourist arrivals are better," organizations such as the UNWTO and WTTC need to temper their bias and report statistics as accurately as possible. In order to reduce the critique of UNWTO's boosterism, it should adopt the definition of international travel as travel between United Nations member states, as has been done within the present paper. What is more difficult to achieve is the international consensus on territorial borders to avoid such situations as, for example, with Abkhazia or Crimea. Obviously, it would be ideal not to have international and internal conflicts. Both the providers and users of tourism statistics need to critically analyze the statistics provided and not just accept them blindly. Suppliers and users of tourism statistics need to be mindful of exaggerating the proliferation of tourists, given that much of the world's population is not undertaking international travel and that those that are traveling "internationally" could well be categorized as domestic tourists. Lastly, individual countries need to follow internationally recognized standards for collecting and reporting statistics to paint a more accurate picture of the current state of global tourism (Masiero, 2016). It almost goes without saying that more resources including financial resources are needed for the collection and dissemination of statistics and for the training of providers and users of tourism statistics at a national and international level.

This research article discusses tourism statistics by reviewing existing secondary data. UNWTO Yearbooks and Compendiums of Tourism Statistics serve as the major source of data for Sections 2 and 3. Section 4 of the paper constructs an argument based on the information provided by international bodies, national and regional governments, and mass media. Although this approach is suitable for a critique of the current state of affairs, it may not provide an in-depth understanding of the workings of tourism statistics bodies. Moreover, it would be beneficial to undertake a qualitative research study into ways for improvement of the tourism statistics system. A Delphi study and an analytic hierarchy process study that involves a large international panel would be suitable for identifying and prioritizing a

comprehensive list of tourism statistics issues and reaching a consensus regarding the improvements necessary in tourism statistics.

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